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On Their Way to Manhood: Boys in Single-Sex Schools

Introduction

Single-sex education¹, which used to be commonplace², in recent years is making a strong comeback. While it is still not an obvious choice in Poland – far from it – there are many people who are interested in separating the sexes in education, and people founding and successfully leading single-sex schools. The ones that already function are usually elitist in character, are private and officially non-denominational (Stradowski 2013, p. 25)³.

The best known single-sex schools in Poland, both for girls and for boys, are run by Stowarzyszenie Wspierania Edukacji i Rodziny “Sternik” [Education and Family Support Association “Sternik”], founded in 2003 by a group of parents, with its headquarters in Warsaw. Well established and recognizable, the Warsaw establishment became a model and almost a “mother” for Gdansk’s Stowarzyszenie Kulturalnego Wspierania Edukacji i Rodziny “SKWER”⁴. The cooperation of both associations can be seen in many aspects of their everyday activities and their schools.

The aim of this article is to establish the model of masculinity (man and religion, gender, civic duty) promoted by single-sex schools, specifically by Warsaw’s

¹ The English term *single-sex education* is translated by the author, like by most Polish educators, usually as “*edukacja zróżnicowana ze względu na płeć*”. Sometimes also the terms “*edukacja monoplciowa*”, “*edukacja jednopłciowa*”, and “*edukacja monogamiczna płciowo*” are used (comp. Śliwerski 2011).

² Single-sex education is the oldest kind of education known to humanity, although in the 20th century, because of, among other things, communist ideology, it was forgotten. The turn of centuries sees some attempts to return to gender segregation in schools, treated as something entirely new, as an alternative to co-education, strongly rooted in human mentality for only several decades.

³ In 2007, there were only 75 private single-sex schools in Poland, while in the United States (according to 2011 studies) there were ca. 400 public (state) schools of this kind.

⁴ The “SKWER” association was founded in 2000, but only through following the experiences of “Sternik” it started to develop more strongly and actively work in the area of single-sex education (www.skwer.org.pl, accessed on 13.12.2014).

elementary school for boys “Żagle” (run by “Sternik”) and Gdansk’s school “Fregata” (a similar school run by “SKWER”), a model that is quite analogous, which is the result of the previously described relationship.

All the information about both schools was acquired by the author from their official websites (www.sternik.edu.pl and www.skwer.org.pl), as, which is worth noting, she was not permitted to access directly the schools run by the Gdansk association. She was not given any specific reasons behind this decision.

Conceptual analysis

In order to be able to analyse the model of manhood promoted by single-sex schools, one first needs to define it. *Słownik Współczesnego Języka Polskiego* [Dictionary of the Modern Polish Language] defines *męskość* – *masculinity* as “the totality of traits typical for a man; his attitude, facial features, behaviour” (Słownik 1996, p. 509). What, therefore, are typically male traits? The same dictionary describes *męstwo* – *manhood*, from which the Polish word for *masculinity* is derived as “courage, bravery, heroism, fearlessness, valour, endurance” (Słownik 1996, p. 509). However, these are only a few of the traits typically ascribed to men. This set is often expanded by traits connected with the roles played by men in society. Among the positive traits posited there usually are: independence, dominance, ambitiously striving to achieve one’s goals, self-reliance, rationality, logic, self-restraint and self-control, abstract thinking, activity, firmness, decisiveness, and effectiveness. The negative traits include: difficulty with establishing close relations with people, emotional frigidness, aggression, callousness, tactlessness (Brannon 2002, p. 212–225).

According to the proponents of single-sex education, the thus-defined masculinity is inherent to every boy, but today it does not fully come to the surface in many cases, is erased, and mixed in the process of upbringing with traits traditionally ascribed to women and womanhood, and opposed to all the ones listed above. The single-sex schools described in this study, already by separating boys from girls, want to protect this masculinity, by first and foremost emphasising its positive aspects, and working on suppressing the negative ones. Their ideological closeness to the manly traits listed in the dictionary is seen already in one’s first contact with them – in the logo, a symbol that is to summarise the project’s foundations concisely but clearly.

The logo – a symbol of masculinity

The schools in question are spiritually close to the organisation founded in 1928 by the priest Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, known generally as Opus Dei (God’s Work). The first schools based on the doctrine promoted by this religious

movement were founded in Spain in the 1960s. Their core was to be the teaching of navigation – not literally, but metaphorically. Navigation was understood as moral education, which not only was to allow the child to “sail out” of the family home (port), but first and foremost to constantly keep the once chosen, correct course, among the tempests and maelstroms of everyday life (seas and oceans). This reference to sailing resulted in the coat of arms used by the organisation, which depicts a sailing ship. (Nalaskowski 1991, p. 4–5)

The coat of arms of the Spanish schools became an inspiration for their Polish “branches”. The arms of the “Żagle” [Sails] school refers to navigation through many of its details. The most important one is the steering wheel and a ship ascending high waves and reaching towards a star/comet. This symbolism depicts conquering hardships on one’s way to truth. The star itself is to either evoke the Star of Bethlehem, guiding the Three Magi to the new-born Child, or The Virgin Mary (Stella Maris – Star of the Sea). The Latin inscription at the bottom reads “Duc in altum” (“Sail towards the depths”).

The “Fregata”⁵ school has a much more modest coat of arms. In addition to the waves, there is only a steering wheel. The reference of the symbolism of both coats of arms to masculinity seems clear. A boy graduating from one of these schools, a man, should not fear the hardships that life puts in front of him. He should strive to reach for the truth, which can be done only through following clear norms, grounded in many years of tradition, here very much sanctified by Christianity⁶.

The mission of both schools undoubtedly develops further the model of masculinity illustrated by both symbols.

The mission, or a task to be fulfilled

The activity of schools, both co-educational and single sex, has always been focused on two basic aims. The first one, for years seen as supreme, was the teaching of knowledge and skills, and the second one, was raising the young generation to follow the established norms and ideals.

These aims dominated the mission and everyday life of both the analysed schools. The education and upbringing in the schools should first and foremost: be at a high level, bring out the children’s hidden potential, and support their holistic development: intellectual (mind), moral (will), physical (body) and spiritual (feelings). By adjusting to the specific needs and preferences of pupils (different

⁵ The names of schools/associations – “Sternik” [Helmsman], „Żagle” [Sails], “Fregata” [Frigate] – are also connected with sailing onto the deep sea.

⁶ The associations running the schools strongly emphasise their officially non-denominational character, seeing Christian principles as ethical (Christian identity), and therefore linking acquiring them with shaping a boy to be a good man, not necessarily a Christian. However, this does not change the fact that a child, not knowing Christianity, cannot become well disposed towards this religion. The school should facilitate familiarizing oneself with it (the apostolate idea).

for boys and girls), and basing on Christian values, single-sex schools prioritise shaping the boys' good habits and virtues, and teaching them to boldly face challenges that the reality puts in front of them. "In cooperation with families [school as an "extension of home"⁷] we try to shape spiritually mature men, responsible citizens who will care for the common good, competent and efficient workers, sensitive members of future families, men with a passion for learning and constantly perfecting themselves – persevering, industrious, honest and responsible people, with solidarity and entrepreneurship, able to overcome hardships and to serve others" (www.sternik.edu.pl – *Historia i misja* [History and mission]).

It is worth noting that both schools operate on the basis of an educational concept recognised by many prestigious schools in the world, which is centred around the idea, popular in the middle ages, of the seven liberal arts (skills characterizing a free man) – a concept known as Liberal Arts Education. Based on its guidelines, a school educates and brings up a free man, i.e. one with vast knowledge and high learning skills, one who is wise – able to distinguish good from evil, open to others, one who understands himself and the surrounding world, one who is open and flexible in his thinking, which is to help him in the constantly changing world, and, finally, one who thinks critically, and therefore wisely shapes the world and can play the role of a leader.

The mission of sex-segregated schools also refers several times to the person of the teacher, who, alongside the parent and pupil, shapes a given institution to a large extent. The requirements for teaching at these kinds of schools are high and are not without influence on the key concept of masculinity.

The teacher – a model of masculinity

The right selection of staff, in the time of a crisis of school institutions, when the youth, asked about authority figures, often point to none of them, is a matter of great importance. Single-sex schools rigorously select their candidates, wanting the chosen ones to be a role model for the students, representing, by their attitude and life, the values promoted by the schools, and therefore, by themselves to "support the boys in discovering their manhood and shaping their strong character" (*Historia i misja*) [History and Mission].

For a given teacher to even be taken into consideration in the recruitment process, they must be a man. A woman, because of her gender, is without any chances in this competition. Why a man? This is especially because – as argued by the schools' management – he also used to be a boy, and only someone like this can

⁷ This means that the school is to support and continue the principles and values that the family imbues the child with, is to actively support the upbringing. For this to be possible, before admitting the child to the school, the candidates' families are rigorously and acutely selected. The school could not support a family that would stand out from the school in terms of lifestyle.

understand the distinctive conditions of growing up to be a man. Only communication from a man is fully understood for another man, as it is clear and brief (unlike the way women communicate). Furthermore, only someone of the same sex, who also competes, fights, craves for risk and adventures, can develop such natural urges in his pupils.

It is stipulated that a teacher in a boys' school, a real, heterosexual man, should be married, and have a full family, and therefore the kind in which all of his chosen pupils are being brought up⁸. If he does not already, he should in the future. These guidelines, connected with the school's Christian identity, do not create a dissonance between home and school (the parent and the teacher are two parallel, not divergent models), and guide the boy, despite spending most of the day without women, towards heterosexual relationships, which dominate in society.

Among many requirements that the staff is subject to, two more issues deserve attention in the context of masculinity and manhood. The first one is an expression used by the principal of the "Żagle" school when explaining his selection of employees. According to him, the teacher should bring up pupils to be "Christian gentlemen", being one himself, based on the convergence of theory and practice, words and actions (*List od Dyrektora, Szkoła Podstawowa dla chłopców* [Letter from the Principal, Elementary School for Boys]). They should be Christian, and therefore, in brief, guided by the ten commandments in everyday life; gentlemen, and therefore men who are "well behaved, tactful, being able to act appropriately in every situation, and trustworthy."

The second issue that teachers are to be especially helpful with, and which is also connected with being a gentlemen, is bringing the pupils up to be "men that their [parents' or teachers'] daughters would like to marry (*List od Dyrektora, Szkoła Podstawowa dla chłopców* [Letter from the Principal, Elementary School for Boys]). This is a very general statement, as for each person different aspects might hold value, but its connotations, however one might interpret it, are decidedly positive and sound promising. In order to realise such an ambitious goal – to bring up someone to be a man desired by the "fairer sex" – a set of rules and guidelines was created that the schools should follow in order to bring out the boys' hidden potential.

School organisation

The way a given school is organised is not without influence on the model of masculinity it promotes. Furthermore, the school, being subject to top-down guidelines, significantly reinforces this model.

Aside from male teachers and adjusting the educational requirements to the developmental stage of the boys, the schools also: divide the year into three trimes-

⁸ It is important for the student to have both a mother and (especially) a father. Due to random events (such as a parent's death), this requirement does not always correspond with reality.

ters; have a special organisation of the day, adjusted to the students; have a preferred method of studying – working in groups; base the teaching on guidelines taken from the philosophical doctrine of empiricism; put emphasis on the reading skill; have specific rules in place for when the student is on school grounds; have a programme of so called “good habits”; use a Christian spiritual formation based on the methods of the aforementioned Opus Dei; work closely with the parents.

In the normal, co-educational school that most Polish students attend, the school year is divided into two semesters, and only at the end of the year does one receive a school report with the results of one’s ten-month’s efforts. The same-sex schools for boys modified this sanctified tradition and divided the year into three shorter parts. What was their motivation? Again, it is trying to meet manly needs. According to the psychological studies they cite, this division (adequate stimulation) positively influences the students’ motivation and the effects of the effort are measurable and quickly visible, which is important from the point of view of the boys.

The organisation of the school day is also different. Analogously, based on studies claiming that boys, in order to have fewer problems with concentration in class, need a significant amount of exercise, the management of these same-sex schools decided to introduce in younger grades, aside from the regular physical education classes, two additional “running breaks” (40 minutes before noon and 60 in the afternoon), and in older grades “recreation time”⁹.

During physical activities, but especially during mental ones, boys often work/play in groups, as this is how most of their activities outside of school look, usually including their later professional activity. Young men are fond of competition and it is this work in groups (when possible balanced in terms of skills, talents) under the watchful eye of the teacher-referee which is to allow them to realise this natural tendency. The rules that regulate this cooperation also teach the boys to honourably compete, using the rules of fair play.

Cooperation, in order to bring the expected results, according to the same-sex school doctrine, is often based on practical experience. It is seen as the most effective for boys, most noticeable from the outside in putting lessons of a given subject, or even different subjects (e.g. art and technology), in blocs, which allows them to realise many projects and achieve quick effects of their work. Students from the analysed schools also have access to a programme of school trips that allow them to see things discussed in class in practice. The fact of the school having a garden cared for by the students is also emphasised (which helps them see directly some things discussed in natural sciences classes).

The garden, usually taken care of and cultivated by women, can be an argument for abolishing, not reinforcing the gender stereotypes by the schools. The

⁹ The author was not able to acquire information on how much time is given for “recreation” to older students. It is likely that this is not constant and is adjusted to the needs of students or arbitrarily set by teachers.

same applies to reading skills. Only by observing the environment, people on the streets, in public transport, can one determine that it is women who tend to read books more often. It is also believed that girls master reading more quickly. Schools for boys see infusing their students with a love for literature and improving the inglorious statistics as one of their priorities (around 60% of men do not read any books in a given year). The daily schedule includes one hour for reading any book. Additionally, at the beginning of their school career, the children also attend reading and writing preparation classes and throughout their school education, they can also participate in additional reading-related activities, such as the "Żagle" school's programme entitled *Książki dla ambitnych* [Books for the ambitious] or a family event *Czytanie to męska rzecz* [Reading is a manly thing]. These efforts quickly bear fruit, as their third grade students achieve results in reading tests typical for sixth-graders. A real man is, if not a major book enthusiast, at least someone who is not averse to them.

This reading development, among other things, would not be possible if not for the specific rules regulating the way pupils function in the school (another distinctive component). The rules are formulated in the first person (e.g. "I care", "I try"), for the most part are devoid of the word "no" (negation, negative associations), and are divided into four categories: "my attitude", "relations with others", "behaviour in school", "classwork". The first of these categories obliges boys to be cheerful and smiling, to set challenges for themselves as high as their capabilities, to improve themselves, admit their mistakes, speak the truth and cultivate their language; the second one is about agreeable cooperation, caring about their friendships, being of service to others, using polite phrases ("I'm sorry", "please", "thank you", "good morning", "goodbye" etc.), showing respect to others, not using violence to resolve conflicts nor in any other situation; the third is about punctuality, cleanliness, respect for others' property, neat appearance (uniform), keeping silence in the school building; the fourth is about: being prepared for lessons, obediently following the teacher's commands, not disturbing others, leaving your desk clean after finishing work, volunteering to speak up when an opportunity arises. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree – rules formulated in this way, if mutually respected and realised in reality, will likely have positive results in the future. A pupil shaped in this way will definitely become the "gentleman" that the schools strive to create.

Such rules of conduct became the foundation for one of the most important programmes realised by both schools – the year-long programme of so called "good habits", according to which each month of the school year has an assigned virtue that one should work on in a given period. According to the school management, the aim of the programme is to shape the students' character and prepare them to face adulthood. What is more, this takes place not only at school but especially at home, under the watchful eye of the parents, who every month are given a description and specific guidelines helpful in working with their son. In the school year 2014/2015, the habits chosen, starting with September, were: order-

liness, industriousness, bravery, perseverance, friendship, generosity, responsibility, obedience, honesty, joy. This clearly determines the model of man promoted by the schools. Of particular interest, from the point of view of this article, is the November habit – bravery. It is worth looking at for a while longer.

The didactical plan for November, for classes 0–3 and 4–6, is comprised of weekly slogans and the category of piety. Younger boys were to try to realise the following mottos: “I like hard tasks” (1st week), “I don’t give up easily” (2nd week), “Instead of crying and complaining – I talk” (3rd week), “I set ambitious goals for myself”, by praying for the dead as part of piety (4th week). In turn, the older students were obliged to remember about daily prayer and realised the following: “I fight for valuable things” (1st week), “I eat what I am given” (2nd week), “What is valuable doesn’t come easily, but I don’t surrender to hardships” (3rd week), “Dedication makes us brave” (4th week). Each of these mottos is accompanied by a commentary that aids in their understanding. To quote some fragments: 1) “Anyone can do easy things, but only mature, brave, courageous people decide to take on harder challenges [...] All situations can be coped with eventually; 2) Bravery can also be practiced during meals. We don’t always like the meals we are given; [...] a brave person is not picky, does not complain but eats everything [...] does not allow himself to be driven by momentary dislike; 3) When something hurts us a little, we have a small scratch or we fall, we don’t have to complain [...] we clean the wound, stick on a band-aid and forget about it [...] To be brave is not to complain but to solve problems; 4) The virtue of bravery makes a man happier, because he is able to solve many problems in life and he quickly forgets about his failures”. This is seen as how a pupil of a single-sex school should always behave as a real man.

The character of the sex-segregated schools, as was previously mentioned, is also shaped by their spiritual foundation based on the teachings of the Catholic Church, inspired by the life of Saint Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei. While admitting their Christian identity, both schools are officially classified as non-denominational (they are not run by any Church institution), not imposing their views, and respecting the liberty of conscience. If someone does not share their religious views, they are not obliged to do so, although Christianity is a source of a number of habits and virtues (honesty, generosity, love of one’s neighbour, spirit of service), thanks to which one can make good choices in life, be a good man and citizen. People of other faiths are familiarised with the above, as, according to the people in charge of the schools, one cannot freely choose Christianity without knowing it. Each of the schools has its own priest, an Opus Dei representative, who gives individual aid to the boys and their families. The students are, from the beginning, instilled with the message that work and normal life circumstances are an opportunity to meet God, serve others and to improve their society (the motto of Josemaría Escrivá).

When analysing the organisation of sex-segregated schools that are to bring the students closer to fully achieving their masculinity, one cannot forget about

parents (both of them!) – an equal link in the school-home-child triad. The school authorities of the schools emphasise that it is the parents that bear the full responsibility for bringing up their children. The school is only to assist with that and cooperate with the home when it comes to promoting the values and educational principles. One of the most distinctive initiatives of these schools, which aims for the widely understood integration of the child with the parents, and especially the father – the model and authority, a very important guardian for the young boys – is the so called father and son trips. Each excursion includes campfires, football matches, various activities whose goal is to strengthen the bond between father and son, looking at the son's relations with the peers through a fatherly eye, meeting other fathers to exchange experiences. By spending free time among men, a boy has an opportunity to see masculinity in practice, to choose the best parts of it so that, in the future, as a graduate of a sex-segregated school, he can become a real man.

Graduate profile

Both schools emphasise both the intellectual and the spiritual development of their pupils. By realising their guidelines, they want each boy leaving their confines to not only have the knowledge needed for further stages of education, but also to be self-reliant and disciplined; creative, ready for taking on the effort of learning for his entire life; willing to cooperate, able to cope with problems faced in everyday life and to adjust to changing conditions of the surrounding reality; respectful of his neighbours, moral, a good man, living in accordance with his conscience shaped according to Catholic norms (*Profil absolwenta* [Graduate profile], Fregata). This is another set of traits characterising masculinity according to the sex-segregated schools.

Conclusions

Single-sex schools for boys through practically every action, more or less consciously, bring their pupils closer to the traditional model of masculinity. The sum of the traits and attitudes listed in this article that should characterise a boy attending "Żagle" or "Fregata", according to the schools themselves, juxtaposed with the dictionary definition of masculinity and manhood mentioned in the beginning of the article, allows us to notice that the masculinity promoted by both schools, although it includes the scientific explanation, also expands it, adding several traits connected with the junction point between masculinity and religion (Christianity), such as masculinity understood as dedication and serving others. However, I think that most of the postulated traits fit into the traditional view of a real man, well rooted in the social consciousness. What does this result from? The proponents

of single-sex education directly state that a man is different from a woman and should be aware of it in a world where masculinity and femininity are often being mixed and it is becoming harder to define both of these categories. Although equal, they are different, and not all differences can be transgressed, despite the will and many attempts at combating them. If single-sex schools are gaining more and more proponents, the need for masculinity and femininity as understood for centuries and promoted by these schools still exists and has a basis for it in a world dominated by the right to pluralism and tolerance ensured by the democratic institutions, and, first and foremost, by the right to free choice for all. Maybe other schools, other people, prefer more feminised models of masculinity, or maybe have different priorities altogether, but these schools for boys have set their own course and keep to it consistently. They can.

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Summary

On their way to manhood: boys in single sex schools

This articles is an exploration of the ways in which single sex schools structure the norms of masculinity: how participation in single sex schooling may serve as a masculinizing practice – a practice that helps shape, reinforce and validate the constructions

of certain versions of masculinity – and how boys construct identities that are consonant with this practice.

Keywords

masculinity, school, identity, single-sex education

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